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ABSTRACT

On the basis of experiences in implementing federal programs, particularly the Trainers of Teacher Trainers (TTT) program as it was funded and administered under the Education Professions Development Act, this article makes 11 recommendations to federal agency personnel regarding needed directions for change in the area of project evaluation in education. The recommendations deal with (a) realistic time frame for educational change, (b) funding for planning, (c) expectations of national agencies, (d) programs as process, (e) funding cycles, (f) support vehicles, (g) staggered evaluation, (h) emphasis on quality and quantity, (i) feedback, (j) evaluation backlash, and (k) demands on local project staff. (Author)

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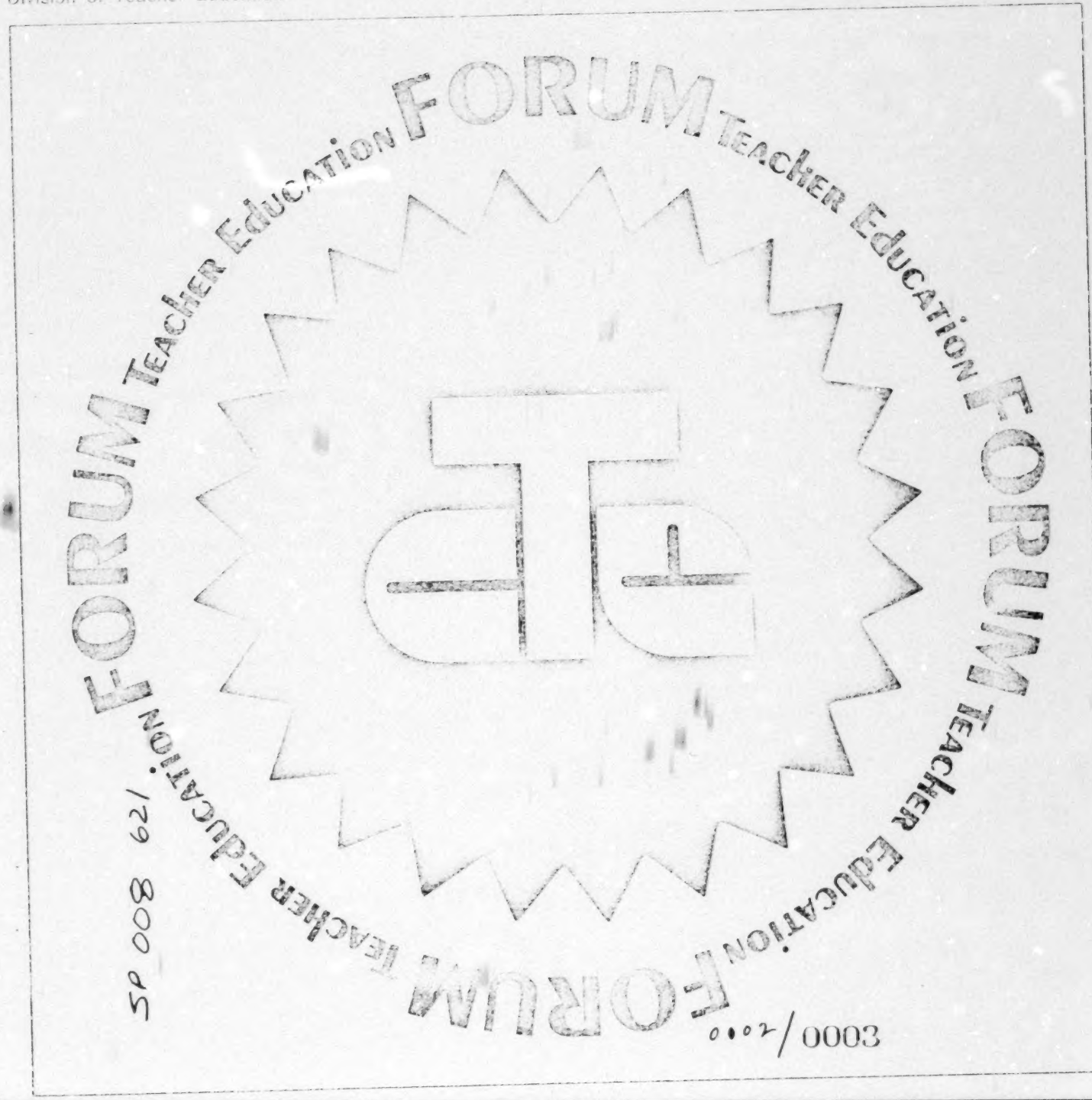

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SOME RECOMMENDATIONS TO FEDERAL AGENCY PERSONNEL REGARDING THE EVALUATION OF EDUCATION

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Much of the material and all of the recommendations which follow are taken from a manuscript published by the Center for Linguistic Studies entitled Stirrings in Teacher Education.[1] The purpose of this earlier document is to present a view from those of us in the educational community who are responsible for implementing federal programs and conducting their evaluation. Specifically, that document focuses on the Trainers of Teacher Trainers (TTT) Program as it was funded and administered under EPDA. The book itself sets a background by discussing the national program and its relationship to the Indiana University-Bloomington TTT Project, then outlines the many dimensions of the Indiana University project inclusive of impact on both institutions and individuals, and terminates with a set of recommendations to federal agency personnel, local project personnel, and local agency personnel in leadership positions.

The recommendations which follow are taken from that document and are addressed to federal agency personnel. Each recommendation is based upon our experience in the TTT program. Many of the recommendations have grown out of our experiences with the implementation and evaluation processes which were employed at both the national and local level. Many others focus upon the results of those processes. In the event that further clarification is needed in order to fully understand any one of the recommendations which follow, reference should be made to this earlier and more complete document.

Realistic Time Frame for Educational Change

Some process needs to be devised to inform the Congress and persons in leadership positions in the Executive Branch of government of how long it takes to build an educational program of TTT magnitude at both the national and local levels. It cannot begin in an undernourished state, receive a subsistence diet for two years, become aware that it will die in two more, and blossom into rigorous maturity in the meantime. Five years appear to be a fairly typical lifespan for federal programs. Local projects may be even shorter. It is a wonder that these programs have any impact at all under such conditions!

Funding for Planning

Funding strategies should take into account the peculiar nature of the planning period. More than any others, the planning period should be one in which the participants have an opportunity to extend their imagination--to dream a little and

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[1] Smith, Gerald, et. al. Stirrings in Teacher Education. Bloomington, Indiana: Center for Linguistic Studies, 1974.

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look beyond the limitations and constraints of the field. Unfortunately, most local project staffs are only given the opportunity to plan within the constraints of proposal preparation. If Office of Education personnel could provide a more extended period of planning--after the grant is made and with funds available for the purpose--more coherent programs, greater parity, and purposeful evaluation might be the result.

Expectations of National Agencies

National agencies should not create unreasonable expectations with regard to levels of funding on the part of persons submitting proposals. Local personnel do tailor their plans and budgets to the expectations which funding agencies create, and rightly so. In popular parlance, one has to know what game he is playing in order to follow the rules. If agency personnel indicate that they plan to distribute six million dollars in ten or twelve grants and that they expect programs of considerable magnitude, that is precisely what local personnel will deliver. If such expectations are considerably off the mark when funds are distributed, some disillusionment and the cutting of viable program components is likely to ensue. The easiest way to avoid this is for federal agency personnel to anticipate the actions and reactions of Congress and other key persons and to establish realistic budget expectations in program guidelines. This recommendation is made with the understanding that federal program personnel usually do not have full control of the situation and may in turn be responding to actions taken by others.

Programs as Process

Program personnel must acknowledge the evolutionary nature of the national program and the impact its own evolution is likely to have on local projects. There are many issues that arise from the developmental interplay between the national and local programs. The one need that clearly emerges from our experience is the need to provide sufficient lead time for local projects--to study, understand, and respond to changes at the national level. Particular attention should be paid to the relationship between proposal preparation and program implementation. In the TTT program, we began developing proposals in the summer of 1970 which would become programs in the fall of 1971. If new information came to us from the national program in the fall of 1970--for example, the need to stress community involvement--it could not be acted upon in any meaningful way until the summer of 1971, and it could not be incorporated in any substantial program form until the fall of 1972. Hard as it is to believe, this is a two year time lag. We are not advocating that nothing can or should be done in the two year period that intervenes, but any major effort cannot begin until two years later. The reason is simple. Money is required to finance a major change in program. Since funding requests have already been submitted for the following year, it is unlikely that any program not already called for will emerge at that time. To do so is to thwart all the planning that went into the current proposal and that is not a good procedure for winning friends at the local level. A major planning effort and some limited actions can be initiated at the local level and probably will be if project personnel are at all serious about the new direction, but these are not the sort of activities that represent a major change in program. Admittedly, the time lag could have been reduced by half if the announcement had been made a few months earlier but this only reinforces another point--that national program personnel must time their announcements carefully to be effective in promoting change in local programs.

Providing sufficient lead time and carefully timing announcements will go a long way toward resolving the problem, but there are other steps that can be taken. New expectations should be stated in clear terms. It is not always easy for project personnel to discern the difference between "required" and "suggested" changes, and sometimes expectations stated as suggestions are interpreted as requirements by both local and national personnel. By stating its intentions clearly, the Office of Education will not be penalizing those who decide not to follow such "suggestions."

A set of "trail markers" should be provided to aid project staffs in determining when they are making appropriate changes. Even when local personnel want to follow the spirit of federal guidelines, they may not find it easy to do so. Specific trail markers will help them to know when and where progress is being made.

Finally, national program personnel should take into account the entire range of projects that are operative at the local level and reflect such an understanding through appropriate variations in procedures. This may require the establishment of different guidelines for different types of projects accepting different criteria and procedures for meeting the same guidelines. This probably will not come as a completely new suggestion to federal personnel. Indeed, many may feel they already do such things.

Funding Cycles

The preceding discussion suggests another recommendation: that careful thought be given to the possibility of revising federal funding cycles. The annual cycle has several problems associated with it. In the first place, renewal proposals must be submitted before the latest program has begun and considerably before there is enough experience with it to know what new needs and problems have emerged. Moreover, far less than a one-to-one relationship exists between program planning and proposal preparation. Far from synonymous, these two sets of activities often emphasize, if not require, quite different skills. One calls for persons who can create and implement new ideas; the other, for persons who can articulate and "sell" those ideas. Ideally, the latter process should be based upon and emerge from the former. Under present patterns of funding, the reverse is often true. A longer funding cycle would make it possible to escape from these constraints by allowing more time for program development before the next proposal is due.

A number of alternatives to the annual cycle should be explored. For example, renewal proposals could be prepared by local personnel on a biennial basis while new requests are entertained annually. Continuing requests could also be staggered to permit more careful scrutiny of programs up for renewal each year. If a biennial cycle were adopted one half of the programs would be examined each year. Another variation would be to entertain only requests for major program revisions each year while the present level of support continued for a two year period. A number of such alternatives should be given careful study at the national level.

Support Vehicles

Support vehicles should be established as part of any large-scale national program of funding. Such support vehicles should be carefully designed to service both the needs of the national agency and of local projects as well. The TTT staff deserves credit for establishing perhaps the broadest array of such vehicles ever developed for a national program of funding, e.g., a leadership training program, a systematic program of national and regional conferences and an instructional evaluation and re-

search management center. However, these vehicles did appear to serve the needs of the Office much more than those of the local projects. Special attention needs to be paid to identifying and responding to local needs if support vehicles are to be effective in serving them.

Staggered Evaluation

We recommend that directors of national programs give serious thought to the principle of staggered evaluations. Simply defined, this means that evaluation deadlines be established at different times for different projects. Data can be collected from one group of projects at a given time, from a second group at another time, and so on. How often the cycle would be repeated would depend upon the need for data, the number of projects being funded, and similar factors.

This principle has several things to recommend it. First, it would result in a more rigorous program of evaluation with a smaller number of projects involved each time. More data would be available since different sets of data could be required in each "round" of evaluation. If desired, some data would be repeated each time for cross-validation and other purposes. Local projects would be less burdened by such an effort since each project would be required to provide only a portion of the total data needed. The evaluation effort would be less expensive and data collection and interpretation would be more manageable. Moreover, samples could be drawn for special studies on the basis of such project characteristics as locations, university size, type of program, and so on. An evaluation schedule, drawn early in the process, would permit project staffs to anticipate data collection efforts well in advance of their implementation. Even some undesignated efforts could be incorporated for unanticipated needs. This recommendation is based upon the assumption that not every project must be evaluated at the same time for funding purposes. Even if this assumption is rejected by national agencies, they could employ staggered evaluations for other purposes.

Emphasize Quality and Quantity

In data collection, greater emphasis should be placed upon quality rather than quantity. This criterion should be applied to both national and local evaluation efforts. With programs as complex as TTT, there is the danger of too much evaluation for the needs of the individuals and groups involved. Emphasizing quality rather than quantity and providing coordination for the various efforts will help to reduce the likelihood of evaluation overkill--that is, evaluation being used for its own sake rather than assisting the decision making process.

An emphasis on quantity often reflects poor planning. When the specific objectives of evaluation are not identified in advance, there is the urge to collect as much data as possible in the hope that some of it will be useful. While such an approach does yield data of value, it is a terribly inefficient way to obtain it. Preplanned evaluation results in a more efficient design for data collection. The discussion of staggered evaluation is very much directed at this point.

Feedback

Data collected for national purposes could be of considerable value to local project personnel. To be of maximum value, three conditions must be met. The data must be presented in understandable form. It must make use of a variety of communication vehicles. Finally, it must be timed to the needs of local projects.

By tradition, evaluators tend to be well schooled in the collection and presentation of data but not in the communication of its meaning, a skill closely allied to instruction. From the point of view of local project people, communication skills are equally important. In order to act intelligently on data, the different publics involved at the local level must perceive clearly what the national data (including that from their local project) suggest in the way of problems, issues, and directions and what alternative courses of action exist. A number of tables accompanied by a brief narrative summary will not perform this function. A carefully planned program of feedback is necessary. Such a program would include at least the following characteristics. It would be carried on with persons having expertise in communication skills. It would simplify the presentation of data, make use of slides, tapes, and teams of communication specialists to explain the data and assist the local personnel to plan appropriate actions. It would also provide such feedback over a relatively short span of time. Data gathered in the fall of one year and redistributed in the spring could be useful in program planning for the following year. Such a program places a greater emphasis on communication than many may feel is necessary but some of the costs could be offset by collecting less data of higher quality. Such an approach would presumably have value as well in communicating to Congress and within the Executive Branch of government.

Evaluation Backlash

Provisions should be made to prevent or reduce the effects of evaluation backlash. Programs as complex as TTT are particularly susceptible to this effect. Evaluation efforts at the national and local level often require duplicate responses from the same set of persons at the local level. These are also the persons for whom the training program is making the greatest demands. If the burdens become too great, the result will be lower response rates, hurried responses, growing resistance to evaluation, and a general feeling of resentment which, taken together, we have termed "backlash."

There are several measures that could be tried to counter backlash. One possibility is to collect a smaller quantity of data during the course of the project. Presumably, this will require fewer collection efforts as well. Staggered data collection will help to reduce the total quantity of data and place fewer demands on a given project. Finally, coordination of the local approaches to evaluation may also help to accomplish this objective. Considering the negative effects from backlash, it would seem well worth the effort.

Demands on Local Project Staff

Federal agency personnel should be aware of the many demands being made on local project staffs and the impact of these demands upon the local program. When project staffs are expected to attend conferences, complete data forms, prepare proposals, develop articles for newsletters, and implement a local program--all in the same time frame--they may be hard pressed to find the time. Although we tried to respond in some way to every request from the national program or its representatives, the Indiana staff placed its priorities on local activities, which may not have been wise from a political standpoint. Timing is particularly critical in such matters. There were two important instances when we felt that the Office of Education's tim-

ing was inappropriate. One was the announcement of the site visit early in the operational game; the other a request for three separate evaluations in the same time frame. Evaluation requirements are considerable and should be thought out carefully. With better timing, some tasks that seemed quite onerous would have been less so.

Conclusion

To even the casual reader, this list of recommendations appears to be strong criticism of the evaluation efforts made by or on behalf of the national EDPA-TTT programs. While the recommendations make some criticisms of the national TTT program, these criticisms should not be construed as a general indictment of the entire program or its personnel. The national TTT staff took on an enormous task--to bring about significant change in teacher education--and they left their mark on the future developments in this field. As individuals, the national TTT personnel were warm and cooperative, listened carefully to our complaints and requests, and responded to them when they felt they could. Perhaps the most useful point to be made from the recommendations is found in an earlier observation that the needs of the national program and those of the local projects are not identical and at times may even be in conflict. For example, national demands upon local project staffs during early stages of development can present a distracting annoyance at best and, at worst, a potential threat to the stability and soundness of the project. They frequently focus time and energy away from local needs, vie for the attention of local participants, and overload the resources of local projects at a time when such projects have all they can do to pull themselves together. At the same time, as local project personnel, we acknowledge the need and right of the national program to be evolving its goals and activities as we are evolving ours. The national staff seldom has any more lead time--and may in some instances have less--than it has provided us. Still some thought and effort must focus on this dilemma at both levels if wise and practical solutions are to be found.